

I decided to assert my superior knowledge once and for all. "Have you read a book by a Roman writer called Lucretius? *On the Nature of the Universe*? It presents the materialist view –"

"Yes," he told me readily. "I've read it in the original Latin."

"What?"

"I have a degree in classics. I read Latin and ancient Greek."

I have never dared ask him if my face mirrored my astonishment. To learn that standing beside me in the bar of the Bell, resort of blockheads, was someone proficient in ancient languages, was like discovering that the building had suddenly been transported to the surface of the moon. When, after a moment, I recovered my voice, I sputtered indignantly.

"But why didn't you tell me?"

He was amused. "You mean you only want to talk to me because I have a classics degree?"

"Well, of course."

From them on it was I who became the importuner. Night after night I attempted to engage him in conversation about whatever scientific or metaphysical topic had engaged my attention at the time. It was not long before he became exasperated. Bluntly he informed me that he did not come to the pub for intellectual stimulation. He only wanted to talk to dullards, about nothing at all.

What else would a ghost do? And how else could I describe Alan as I came to know him? The vagueness which infects the academic mind had with him taken quite the wrong direction; his oddness was of a sort which the people around him did not even have the intelligence to notice. With his cleverness, his great erudition, why had he not gone on to gain a doctorate, and then to enjoy the rich rewards of an academic career? One could imagine him in a well-paid post in some American university. Instead he had returned to Donnington and had remained there, with no apparent interest in following any particular occupation. Steeped in the ideals of classical civilization, he possibly thought it unbecoming to strain after position or material comforts; he once confessed to a hankering after the life of a mediaeval monk, poring over the surviving fragments of the libraries of the ancients. As it was he lived a hermit-like existence in a small flat, surrounded by books and guitar scores (he was also an accomplished amateur musician). He never read a newspaper, and was one of those rare eccentrics of the modern world who do not possess, or wish to possess, a television set. He was a sort of faded lost manuscript, a palimpsest, an invisible bubble of learning in a loud and boorish community, which he did not seem to despise as much as he should.

It would have been about a year later, I think, that I came into the lounge early one evening to find him the only other customer. I approached cautiously, aware by now that my presence sometimes annoyed him. While serving me the landlord mentioned having seen the apparition in the three-cornered hat earlier in the day. "Saw him out of the corner of my eye, I did. But when I looked direct he sort of faded away. Denise saw him yesterday, too."

Denise was his wife. He walked through the connecting arch to the bar, leaving me free to speak my

mind. I was firmly of the materialist view and placed no credence in such stories. Alan, too, had announced himself a convinced Democritean when I first met him, so it confused me when he quarrelled with my scepticism. "Don't tell me you believe in ghosts," I said acidly.

"Ghosts, spirits, call them what you will," he said. "Lucretius was wrong: matter isn't everything. The Greeks from Homer on knew that everyone who has ever lived persists as... a shade, they called it." He leaned an arm on the counter. "Do you ever get the feeling that this place has suddenly become very crowded, even though there's hardly anyone here?"

"No, I don't."

He looked up at me with a critical little frown. "But they are swarming all around you right now. People from everywhere, from all times. It's mostly untrue that ghosts haunt the places where they lived. Lively places can't hold them. They have almost no vitality, you see. So they drift down to the nadir, to humanity's lowest trough of mental dullness."

"That sounds like Donnington all right."

"That's right; you can travel the world over, and not find people so uniformly lacking in imagination. And the Bell is its locus. It is the oldest building in Donnington, and has soaked up its qualities over the centuries. Also it is a social meeting place, and that makes it easier for ghosts. So this is the place where they all come to, flitting in and out in a kind of oscillation."

He fell silent as a third customer barged in. It had gladdened me to see Alan break his rule of never saying anything of interest. But his fantasizing disconcerted me. After he had spoken I did indeed seem to feel a heavy stillness descend like a dead weight. Alan grew pale, seemed almost to flicker. I myself felt pale and insubstantial; silent presences seemed to press all around me. Only the red-cheeked ruffian who was now banging on the counter to attract service seemed alive.

Yet which was more real? Is not life itself only a blink between conception and dying? Have not a dozen generations flickered in and out of the Bell Inn? Are we not more ghostly than the dead?

Alan was right about the Bell. Donnington's population had expanded dramatically since the war, as its land use was changed from farming to housing, but the Bell had not changed. It stood alone and isolated a little way beyond the edge of the residential area, as though unable to be assimilated. It had inexplicably failed to benefit from the thousands of potential new customers, despite being the only public house for some distance. On its other side there stretched a tangled and unpeopled landscape.

It was not, however, the only drinking place in the immediate vicinity. Scarcely a hundred yards away, as the crow flies, lies the clubhouse of the local bowls association. I had never set foot there, and so it was a place of vague mystery in my mind. A few weeks later that same year, a flat period in the Bell's business, I was again in the lounge with Alan. It was one of those lingering summer evenings when the sun seems to wander endlessly throughout the low sky, and to have lost the path that will take it beneath the

woman; the second most important character is a woman too. I thought, 'Why should I publish this under a male name?' That's when I began to speculate about gender in genre, because the only answer I could get out of this editor, who shall remain nameless, was, 'Well, science fiction's a male thing.' I was just not interested in playing that game.

"It's this whole idea of, 'You don't want to publish this as a woman, do you?' Of course I do. I wouldn't have written it if I didn't, would I?"

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